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GRIT 687

Interview with a Technology Administrator

For my interview with a technology administrator I choose to speak with Pamela Livingston, an adjunct professor at Chestnut Hill College. Aside from teaching two courses in the Instructional Technology Graduate Program at CHC since 2006, Pamela has an extensive background relating to technology in education. She has held positions including Technical Support Specialist at Hendrick Hudson School District, Director of Information Technology at both Chestnut Hill Academy and KIPP Region TEAM Charter Schools, and the Head of Technology at The Peck School. She is also an advocate of 1:1 Learning Initiatives and has authored 1-to-1 Learning: Laptop Programs That Work, published by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE).

My interview with Pamela consisted of 9 open-ended questions which sought her opinions and observations on topics including creating a technology plan, the implementation of technology in the classroom, technical support in the classroom, and professional development. In the following, I will present the question posed, and a summary of Pamela’s response for each.

1. Do you have any prior experience as a Technology Coordinator of a school district or individual school?

Pamela stated that she has held positions as a Technology Coordinator for both individual schools, both public and private, and for school districts. She stated many years ago when she first entered the field, this was her primary job function. Although she states she may not have had the title as is associated with the job now, the duties she performed were essentially the same as the basic job requirements today. Based off of a question that was proposed in the discussion board, I also asked Pamela if she thought the job of a tech coordinator and information technology specialist was more of an administrative position or a teacher-contract position. Her opinion and experience stated that the role of a tech coordinator was primarily a teacher-contract position, while and ITS position would be more of administrative.

1. Based on your experience and knowledge, how would you rate the overall technology integration in schools and classrooms today?

Pamela bluntly stated that she is “continually disappointed” with the integration of technology into the classroom. Further elaborating, she went on to explain that the disappointment, while somewhat, is not totally from the lack of resources. She feels that the technology and resources are available, but that “the technology integration is in pockets.” Clarifying that, she stated that teachers are armed with the tools, they are all just not utilizing them as they should. “One teacher can be doing great things with technology in one classroom, and across the hall [in the same school, with the same resources], nothing.” Basically, Pamela faulted teachers for not taking the initiative or effort to continue the implementation. “A lot of it is to make the adults comfortable, but the kids are missing out; they are doing a disservice to the students.”

1. Do you have any experience drafting or revising a school or district technology plan? Was this done by yourself or through a committee? What were some challenges you experienced?

Pamela explained she has drafted and revised many technology plans for both individual schools and for districts. Sometimes she would draft or revise herself, other times it would be with a committee, but she said she always presented it to her peers for evaluation and advice. In terms of challenges she faced, she mentioned there are many situational challenges that would arise due to budget, accessibility, or things alike. One recurring challenge she faced was the philosophy of the overall plan. She stated over time she began to evolve the way she would write a technology plan. Initially, her plans were very “techie,” meaning it was very detailed and immersed with many hardware components, software, and peripherals and that was the generally accepted plan. As she developed in her career, she shifted from a “techie” technology plan to a “cognitive” technology plan; focusing more on how the technology was to be used or how it could help educate people.

1. What do you see as the benefits or challenges associated with increasing the use of computer-based assessments in schools.

With this question, Pamela stated I was opening a can of worms. In beginning to discuss assessment, she immediately brought up the No Child Left Behind act, and how it has changed a lot about education, listing content focus, timing, and schedule as a few examples. She verified that assessment is important in education, but was hesitant about how children are being assessed. She voiced concern that today’s assessments are creating students that respond to a test, and teacher who teach for a test. Her overall concern was that critical thinkers are no longer being developed.

1. Do you think the expanded distribution of laptops would have a positive impact on student performance? Why or Why not?

“Not in of itself, will laptops transform learning.” After that immediate comment, Pamela then shared a story of a tour she took of a school who had recently implemented a 1:1 initiative. She stated in one of the classrooms she stepped in on, each student had a laptop open in front of them, the teacher had a computer and projector, and on all screens was the same scanned worksheet. While the teacher wasn’t looking, she stated as she looked at the kids, they would look at her, roll their eyes, and pretend to yawn in reference to the lesson and use of laptops. She then referenced her statement again that laptops, themselves, cannot transform learning. They need to be a vehicle for student-centered learning, not just a personal projector screen.

1. From your experience, what support have you seen available to teachers when they need technical assistance in their classrooms?

Pamela suggested that she has had good luck when it has come to technical support staffs in the schools and districts she has been a part of. Following along with that, she stated that teachers need to be able to depend on technology as a stable, integrated vehicle for learning. “A teacher cannot have two lesson plans, one for technology use, and one as a backup plan incase technology fails.” Therefore, teachers need to be armed with a massive support system. She suggested having spare, backup equipment to be used when an item is to be removed from a classroom for repair or maintenance. She also suggested the idea of utilizing the technical capabilities of students and giving a base level of troubleshooting training to 1 or 2 students per classroom to assist. This idea is also suggested in The Technology Coordinator’s Handbook under the Desktop Support section, referring to the Generation www.Y program mentioned on p. 66.

1. Could you comment, based on your experience, on the professional development availability for teachers regarding technology in the classroom?

When planning and creating professional development, Pamela stated that she always went with varying approaches, and it took a lot of work to vary that approach to empower teachers. She mentioned that along with both formal and drop-in training and development sessions, she also felt it was important that the technical support staff be formally trained in all the same functions of hardware and software as teachers would need so they could “speak the same language,” since there is often a disconnect between the two. One other interesting technique she used was employing the rule that Tech Support should never touch a keyboard themselves unless they actually needed to. The idea of this was to provide support to a teacher as you guided them through the resolution of the issue. By doing so, the teacher would be engaged in a semi, informal training session in which they hopefully would learn how to solve the specific issue they were having, rather than having someone do it for them repeatedly.

1. Could you please describe what you believe to be some of the key components to effective professional development?

First and foremost, Pamela stated that in order for professional development to be effective it needs to be job-embedded. She explained that meaning the training sessions need to be separated by subjects, and again by grade levels. Assembling the faculty for a cookie-cutter, generalized training session which relies on each individual to grasp the concept, analyze the information, and decipher if and how that can be applicable to their curriculum is too much to ask. She added the reminded that in these development sessions, despite being filled with teachers, we are dealing with adult learners, who by nature are very impatient and closed-minded to concepts which they do not directly correlate a benefit or relation to. While she did concede that this would be much more time intensive and expensive, she stated it would be the most effective components to effective professional development.

1. In your opinion, what are the most critical issues related to technology a Technology Coordinator will face in the upcoming future? Of a 3 - 5 year technology plan?

Pamela first stated that with today’s rapid advancement of technology, there should be no more 5 year technology plans as they would become too outdated. She also mentioned that mobile and handheld devices should be addressed further in the next few years. Most prominently, she urged that students should be becoming more involved in the technology implementation of their schools. She suggested involving the student body during the needs assessment stage of a technology plan, and maybe even having a student committee who assists in the drafting or revision of the plan; let the students have a voice in the way they will learn and develop themselves. This idea follows in line with Pamela’s overall suggestion that the philosophy of educational technology should shift to a more student-centered approach, where the student controls their learning experience and technology, rather than a teacher-centered approach, where the instructor guides and manages the lesson.